

Cooking Fuel Saves Lives: A Holistic Approach to Cooking in Humanitarian Settings

Women's Refugee Commission

Background

In complex emergencies, the humanitarian system tends to address issues of concern by focusing on individual sectors, such as health or food. However, the Women's Refugee Commission has found that when it comes to cooking fuel, an integrated approach is essential. Recognizing the cross-sectoral nature of cooking fuel, the Women's Refugee Commission and the InterAgency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (SAFE task force) developed a framework outlining the key fuel-related challenges and solutions across eight sectors of humanitarian response. This comprehensive and holistic approach to all eight sectors is necessary to ensure that displaced women and their families have safe access to appropriate cooking fuel. Below is information on the information, education and communication sector.

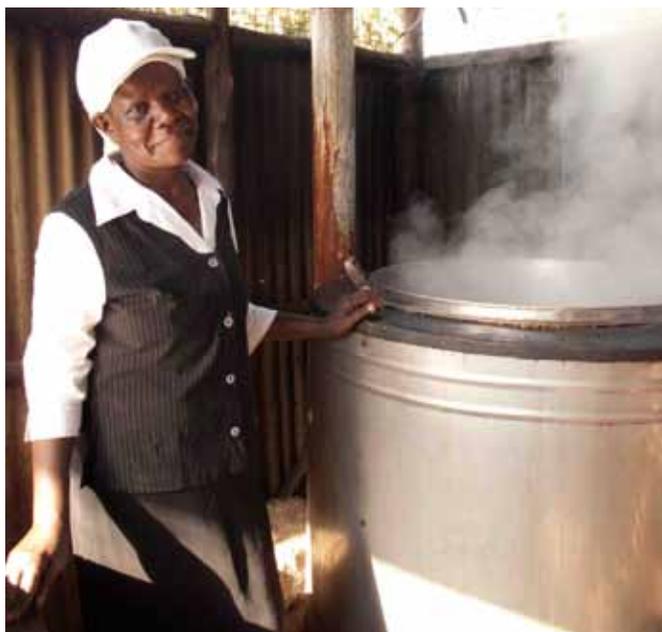
The SAFE task force combined traditional, school-based education and the information, education and communication (IEC) sectors into one.

IEC is a process of raising public awareness to promote positive behavior change through different kinds of learning, including messaging campaigns, demonstrations, dissemination of printed materials, radio or drama and other creative mechanisms. IEC is frequently associated with health activities (promoting breastfeeding, for example), but can be used to raise awareness and spread information about a wide variety of topics. Schools and other learning environments for children and young people are also key venues for awareness-raising and information sharing. In many displacement settings, school feeding programs are used to encourage school attendance, reduce burdens on families and improve child nutrition.

The Problem

Displaced women are not always familiar with the types of food rations—or fuel-efficient stoves or alternative fuels—that the humanitarian community gives them. This lack of understanding can result in overcooking and wasting food or cooking fuel, or it can mean that potentially useful new technologies are not adopted for lack of information and training. Moreover, fuel-efficient cooking techniques like pre-soaking beans to reduce cooking time cost no money and are easily done, but awareness-raising campaigns are rarely undertaken.

Despite the importance of education or skills-building for immediate support and protection, as well as for longer-term livelihoods opportunities, children—particularly girls—are frequently



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kept from school or other educational opportunities to collect firewood for their families, or to tend to younger children and household chores while their mothers are out collecting wood. Save the Children UK found that drop-out rates for girls in Southern Sudan are the highest in the world, largely because they must leave school to take on the burdens of household chores.¹

Children are often an economic lifeline to displaced families with few other income opportunities, meaning they must work menial jobs to earn money rather than gaining the education needed for better opportunities in the future. The grandmother of an eight-year-old girl told the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Senegal: "If she goes to school, we can't eat."² When schools began reopening in post-earthquake Haiti, many parents, who had lost their jobs and were surviving on \$5 per day payments from the UN for clearing rubble, had to choose between paying their children's school fees or buying charcoal to cook.

School feeding programs play a key role in enhancing the nutritional intake of schoolchildren who may otherwise be forced to skip lunch, and, by reducing the burden of feeding children at home, can also encourage parents to send their children to school. However, school feeding programs typically use wood—often on inefficient open fires—to cook for hundreds of children at a time, making these programs among the largest institutional users of firewood.

In some cases, families are required to contribute firewood to these school feeding programs, and children may be kept from class if they or their families cannot find enough wood to bring to school. This is doubly crippling, because infrequent school attendance reduces learning and therefore decreases the employment and other opportunities that children should have over the long term.



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The Solution

IEC workers have a key role to play in encouraging partner organizations to use schools, community centers or food distribution points to teach fuel-efficient cooking practices, including construction and use of fuel-efficient stoves and fuel-saving cooking techniques like pre-soaking beans, sheltering cooking fires from the wind and using only dried wood.

Spreading awareness on the benefits and proper use of fuel-efficient stoves or cooking fuel alternatives can help women feed their families more efficiently and effectively, helping to prevent malnutrition and reducing the amount of respiratory illnesses caused by smoke from wood fires. Demonstration and promotion of fuel-efficient stoves and cooking techniques can reduce overall firewood consumption, thereby helping to ensure that children are not forced to leave school—and school feeding programs—to collect firewood for their families or schools. School feeding programs themselves should be encouraged to use fuel-efficient stoves in order to reduce the massive amount of firewood they typically use and thus the burden on families and the environment.

¹ <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/sudan-and-southern-sudan.htm>.

² "From a vicious to a positive cycle: Girls' education in Senegal," UNICEF, April 14, 2005.